Pro Town USA and its Freestyle BMX Circle

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Word count: 7,324.

Introduction

The opening onscreen text of “Pro Town: Greenville,” a 2010 documentary about Freestyle BMX (the equivalent of skateboarding on bicycles) reads “34 Pro BMX riders, 21 Gold Medals, 1 Small Town.” While this statement was made both to generate surprise and interest—which it does, it also undersells the significance of these riders in the field of BMX, as it counts only major competitions and neglects all noncompetitive accomplishments (such as appearances in popular media or other forms of recognition). A narrating voice then says that other lifestyle sports like surfing and skateboarding have originated in California, and that BMX basically has often followed a different drum. My work help solve the puzzle expressed in the first lines of that documentary.

The aim of my paper is to explain why a small group of Freestyle BMXers moved to a small town in North Carolina during the late 1990s, and was able to progress so much as to become a recognizable and very influential group in this activity. Why them? Why there? Why then? And how? As my paper shows, some of the characteristics of living in a small and fairly isolated town aided the technical and professional development of these riders to a large degree. Consequently, differently than how it would initially appear, Greenville was actually a perfect “set up,” and at the time, certainly much better than many other alternative locations. As Dave Mirra—one of the leaders of the group puts in the documentary: “who would have thought that such a small town could be so much fun.” In order to explain this case I
make use of findings that have been conceptually interrelated in the theory of **collaborative circles** (CCT) developed by Michael Farrell (2001) while studying other creative small groups in different spheres. The result is a socio-psychological theory that explains the creative collaboration of small groups through seven stages of development (from formation to separation and eventual nostalgic reunion), and a number of interpersonal dynamics (in particular, escalating reciprocity and instrumental intimacy) and personalities. Like any theory, however, this work is far from complete, and in particular leaves “context”—in CCT defined as the “**magnet place**”—largely under-theorized.

Freestyle BMX is an activity (and subculture) that originated in the 1980s, branching out from BMX racing (Nelson 2010). BMX racing became a popular phenomenon in the US during the 1960s, partially due to the mass production of the Schwinn “Sting Ray” bike. Notably, aspects of this bicycle resembled a motorcycle, with “ape-hanger” handle bars, a banana seat, and smaller tires and frame than a road bike.

In the mid-1980s a new style of riding emerged from BMX riders who began performing tricks on their bicycles to kill time between races (Nelson 2007). Eventually, Freestyle BMX supplanted racing in popularity among riders. Among its many advantages, it could be practiced individually (without the need for other people to race against) and virtually anywhere (instead of on a maintained track)—from flat ground to city lots, and eventually to constructed ramps (Nelson 2008).

Since its origins, Freestyle BMX has gone through two major peaks of mass-popularity: first during the late 1980s, and second beginning in 1995 with the launch by ESPN of a large series of televised competitions named Extreme Games (X Games) which, along with BMX, also featured a number of other then-marginalized
activities like skateboarding and in-line skating (Nelson 2010; Rinehart 1998).
Throughout this second peak of popularity, a group of transplant BMX riders known as the “Greenville riders” consistently dominated these competitions and ushered the sport to new technical heights. Dave Mirra, a founding member of the group, became the most recognizable name in BMX, and as of this writing has won more X Games medals than any other competitor in any event (Edwards and Corte 2010). Ryan Nyquist, another well-known member of the group, is also recognized as one of the best competition riders in the world. As an indication of their dominance, Mirra and Nyquist were probably the two highest paid athletes in their sport each year for a stretch of ten years (Nelson 2007), and were among the first to hire agents to represent their commercial interests. During the late 1990s and until around 2002, it is likely that as many as a dozen riders (many of them living in Greenville) had annual incomes in the six-figure range with top earners (Dave Mirra and Ryan Nyquist) bringing in as much as $1,000,000 in peak earning years (Fieldnotes 3/10/05; Nelson email 24/10/12).

**Pro Town USA and its Collaborative Circle**

The first group of professional BMXers who relocated to Greenville in the second half of the 1990s can be considered a collaborative circle. This BMX circle consisted of “graduates” of circles from various distant towns and cities who migrated to a place where they found a dense network of people who shared their identities and interests. Dave Mirra moved to Greenville in 1995, and was quickly followed by a small number of other notable professional riders including Mike Laird, Ryan Nyquist, Mike Mancuso, Allan Cooke, Scott Wirch, Rob Darden, Colin Winkleman, and Jeremy Fanberg. Together, they formed a tightly-knit circle of friends whose
performance dominated the major BMX competitions and whose innovations technically advanced their sport.

The work and lifestyle of these Greenville riders differed from what they had been doing in their respective local scenes in several ways. Their riding sessions were more frequent and more intense, and the town was more accommodating to their activity and lifestyle. These riders were motivated by similar professional goals, possessed similar amounts of capital, and were familiar with each other from having met at various competitions over the years. Collectively, their accomplishments attracted national attention and in March 2001, *Ride BMX Magazine*, a niche publication dedicated to BMX riding, dubbed Greenville “Pro Town USA” (Nowak 2001).

Inspired by the success of the Greenville pros, a large number of professional and amateur BMXers began moving to Greenville in the early 2000s. Many riders who did not make the move permanently still visited for extended periods of time (often more than once, and sometimes regularly), as it became an important destination in the field of BMX. Rumours have it that the town is currently considering building a museum displaying the local BMX history.

The original circle remained cohesive until 2002 when its equilibrium was destabilized by multiple factors, including the increase of riders moving into town, and a split among its main dyad—Dave Mirra and Ryan Nyquist. These factors led to the dissolution of the circle, and initiated the formation of other groups within the local scene (Edwards and Corte 2010). Many (but not all) of the advantages of Greenville survived the split, and the city retains its reputation among riders and fans to this day.
As is typical of the collaborative circles studied by Michael Farrell in other fields like art and science, the Greenville riders’ social dynamics not only pushed and inspired them technically, but also sustained them emotionally and materially as an extended family. Moreover, Greenville riders benefited from a mix of resources that included material, moral, and human resources, and others particular to Greenville which I label “locational.” Together, this combination of community and resources enabled the Greenville riders to enjoy what is arguably the most productive, creative, and consequential period of their respective careers.

Greenville Pro Circle: Formation and Composition

Farrell (2001) provides some general comments about the “structural” and “cultural” conditions that are conducive to the formation of collaborative circles. First, he claims that circles tend to arise in the periphery of a magnet place, where mentors with established visions are unavailable to ambitious would-be innovators (P. 267). Second, he argues that “Collaborative circles that develop innovative visions flourish in turbulent cultural environments, where two or more versions of a discipline... vie for centrality in a single place” (P. 268). While the situation for BMX riders was not completely analogous, related dynamics existed.

Within the wider BMX subculture, participating in the major competitions, as Greenville riders aspired to and regularly did, was widely considered “selling out”—at odds with the dominant subcultural ethos of not getting involved with corporate sponsors. More specifically, participation in these events was seen as contributing to making BMX a “sport,” thereby popularizing a diluted, even corrupted version of the original activity (Humphreys 2003). Nelson (2007) writes:

Indeed, it is the professional BMX freestyler or “Pro” who finds himself at the intersection of the “authentic” (keepin’ it real) and the “commodified” (gettin’ paid), and who must negotiate between these imperatives so that he is both compensated and compensatable (that is, he must
Riders who moved to Greenville rebelled both against the wider societal public perception of BMX as nothing more than an adolescent hobby, and against the prevailing ethos of the subculture that often did not see the work and successes of Greenville riders in a positive light.

Avenues of Formation: Informal Networks

The first riders moved to Greenville because they knew someone else who already had relocated to the scene. Mirra played a key role as a gatekeeper, attracting the first pros on the strength of his charismatic personality and his early recognition as one of the most prominent BMXers in the world. Subsequently Nyquist also functioned as a catalyst for drawing in other riders like Allan Cooke and Scott Wirch, two other fellow BMXers from Northern California. After the circle began to achieve significant notoriety, new transplants were more likely to be drawn to Greenville by their reputation than through direct social ties.

Group Composition: Similar Demographic Characteristics

The first riders were very similar in age, gender, social class, and status (none were married at the time, and only one was involved in a stable romantic relationship). Consistent with Farrell’s theory, they were all facing a turning point in their lives, leaving home for the first time and turning professional. It is worth emphasizing that while Mirra was already a successful rider at the time of the move, this did not initially set him apart from the other riders. Mirra, in fact, was still largely dependent on the support of other riders, both emotionally and materially.

Patterns of Formation: Causes

In addition to the “pull” factors that drew riders to Greenville, riders also experienced “push” factors that led them to be dissatisfied with their hometown scene.
Riders relocated to overcome various structural problems, including a lack of human resources in the form of other comparatively talented and committed riders, and lack of material resources in the form of infrastructures such as facilities for practice.

At the end of the 1990s and early 2000, the great majority of localities across the US lacked facilities intended specifically for BMXers. In many places, skateparks restricted BMXers to only fixed days or hours of the week. Moreover, such arrangements charged an entry fee and imposed a code of behaviour on its users. Neither of these conditions was the case with facilities in Greenville, where initially the local ramp park, “Jaycee,” had no gate and no staff, and subsequently a staff that maintained a list of pros who could enter at no charge and where behavior was self-policied by the riders.

Thus their innovative vision of BMX riding emerged from this scene in a manner largely consistent with the “structural” and “cultural” conditions articulated by Farrell—in a peripheral location, and against both mainstream societal dismissals of BMX as a mere hobby and the dominant anti-corporate subcultural ethos. Note,
however, that there is already evidence of other factors—seemingly equally influential—that have no apparent place in Farrell’s theory. Among these were the skatepark “Jaycee” and the attendant norms that guided access to it, and the broader corporate structure that gave these riders an outlet for their ambitions. In the sections that follow, I will show how these and other resources played a crucial role in enabling not just the formation of the circle, but also the interpersonal dynamics that characterized the group as well.

**Influence and Escalating Reciprocity**

*Influence*

Until early 2000 there were very few private facilities available and few riders as well. The group was small and comprised mostly of transplant professionals. “This is a scene of pros” as one rider commented (Lilly Interview 07/05/05). As the riders explained, the fact that there were few other places to ride other than “Jaycee” meant that this park played a hugely important role in their development. Riders could simply go there at any time of the day, any day of the week, and expect to find other talented riders without having to explicitly arrange meetings beforehand. It was tacitly understood that everyone would show up there at some point. Mike Laird, explained:

> Back then “Jaycee” park was the Mecca. This was before we got all the backyard ramps and Dave’s warehouse and all that other stuff, so everybody had to ride there and there was just an intense riding scene… Our sessions were unlike any other session of any scene I have seen before, where the hardest tricks were done once a week, or maybe two weeks. Here you got so many pros just feeding off each other, every day is a “hard trick” session...it will make your riding improve to another level” (Laird Interview 19/04/05).

Ryan Nyquist further elaborated:

> The sessions we had at “Jaycee” park, when it was just a small group of guys, looking back they were really intense…they were great sessions. We were all pushing each other riding-wise…it was not even really pushing, it was just fun to ride at that level and on a daily basis
go “OK, I am goin’ to flip the spine.” Normally you might flip it once a week, but just the fact there were so many really great riders in one spot and everybody was having a good time...it was just kind like a really great formula ...like on a daily basis ride to do great riding, to ride awesome. And it happened a lot. And I feel that like when you are in such circumstances, you can’t help but just to be a better rider. (Nyquist Interview 22/08/09).

At “Jaycee,” riders found others to ride with and to push them to new technical heights. What the riders describe here is what Csikszentmihalyi, in another context, described as flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines flow as a mental state characterized by a total concentration that comes when we are engaged in tasks that are challenging enough not to bore us, but not so difficult as to overwhelm us. At its peak Greenville riders had the luxury of riding almost exclusively with a small stable population of similarly talented riders in a sort of backstage (Goffman 1969) which was especially conducive to achieving flow. This in turn resulted in riding very often at the topmost level generating individual and collective technical progress, as well feelings of general well-being among the riders—an outcome of flow.

**Escalating Reciprocity**

Farrell (2001) argues that bursts of work in collaborative circles are often motivated by the norm of escalating reciprocity. Writing about the relationship between Sigmund Freud and his close friend and collaborator Wilhelm Fliess he writes: “Freud felt he owed something to Fliess, who seemed to pour out work endlessly. Freud was motivated to keep apace and to have something to present at

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1 “Flip the spine” means jumping from one ramp over another one while rotating upside down. It is obviously a fairly dangerous maneuver requiring not only skill, but also commitment and confidence.

2 To be clear, I do not want to give the impression that the scene was completely insulated; riders travelled extensively and gathered influences from the other riders that they met at competitions, demos, or during filming trips. Moreover, riders from other scenes also visited Greenville, and were both shaped by and helped to shape the scene there. But the intimate dynamic of the Greenville scene persisted.
their congresses in exchange for all he had received” (Farrell 2001:185, emphasis added).

Similar to Howard Becker’s (1963) classic study of jazz musicians, Greenville riders “sessioned” or performed for each other rather than having to put on a show for “squares”—people who had unrefined tastes and could not understand the subtleties of riding. And this factor was very advantageous to their development.

During one of my very first days in the field while I was doing participant observation at “Jaycee” park I noticed that unlike other parks I had been to before, riders did not cheer each other as often as I was used to. Puzzled after seeing what seemed to be difficult tricks performed to no acclaim, I inquired about the matter to another rider. He explained that while the tricks I was witnessing were “objectively” difficult and dangerous, they were not “subjectively” so for riders at this level. He further elaborated that BMXers in Greenville ride together so frequently that each has deep knowledge of the other riders’ skills and repertoires. This leads riders to praise one another only when one does something that it is difficult for him, and not merely “objectively” difficult, or difficult for someone else (Fieldnotes 2/2/05). Furthermore, this dynamic led to two main outcomes: first, it allowed riders to push their own limits in order to receive validation from other members of the group. At the same time, it also provided them the freedom to try only the tricks they wanted to work on without feeling pressure from outsiders, since their status within the group had already been established.

Properties of the Magnet Place

Greenville is a city of about 78,000 inhabitants located in Eastern North Carolina. The city is home to East Carolina University (ECU), which has an enrollment of about 27,000 students and was the fastest growing campus in the
University of North Carolina system for six consecutive years (2001-2007). More than once, ECU ranked among the top ten party schools in the US. University students refer to it as “G Vegas” emphasizing two things: its geographical isolation, and its many forms of entertainment. What the desert is to Las Vegas, tobacco and cornfields are to Greenville.

Before the relocation of professional BMXers starting with Mirra in 1995, Greenville, like many other cities in the country, already had a small but vibrant local scene of BMXers and skateboarders. They were the ones who collaborated to build “Jaycee” and other smaller ramps that made Greenville a realistic destination for Mirra and the other riders of the Greenville circle in the first place (Edwards and Corte 2009). As I show, these were far from the only resources that the transplant pros found waiting for them.

**Locational Resources**

By locational resources I refer to properties inherent to the location which can be enjoyed as a resource for virtually any group in the area without having to be actively mobilized. Typically, locational resources include such things as climate, local economy, demography, and cultural history of the place. For Greenville in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these included mild weather suitable for outdoor riding year-round, availability of land to buy or rent at affordable prices, a general low-cost of living, and a university with related recreational activities and a young population.

Other locational resources manifested themselves in conjunction with material and moral resources. I describe these in more detail below.

**Material Resources**

Material resources refer to equipment, facilities, money, or other tangible materials. The most important material resource for the riders was of course the public
skatepark jointly built by BMXers and skateboarders. Although the history of the park and its established norms regarding access are not literally “material,” these elements contributed to making “Jaycee” a more useful resource than skateparks in other cities. This facility was initially free for all. After being refurbished, free entrance was officially allotted for listed professionals. The park employed a young and complacent staff who had a laissez-faire attitude towards the rules. This stood in sharp contrast to ramp parks in most other cities, which barred access to BMXers completely, or allowed access only during certain days and hours of the week. Moreover, these parks generally had rules of conduct which were often quite restrictive. “Jaycee” formally allowed both BMXers and skateboarders, but with the reconstruction of the ramps by proactive BMXers who increasingly tailored them with higher structures more suited for riding than for skateboarding, it became a de facto BMX park.

Moral Resources

According to Bob Edwards and John McCarthy’s (2004) typology—these are two sociologists working in the area of social movements—moral resources include legitimacy, solidarity support, sympathetic support, and celebrity. In this case, the moral resources I refer to consist of the initial tolerance, consequently growing support and recognition riders received from other inhabitants of Greenville. This acknowledgement came with privileges granted by authorities, employers, and the wider population, from college students to tertiary workers such as bar owners.

The city of Greenville instead tolerated BMXers for two main reasons: First, for the notoriety of the riders who were increasingly perceived to be professionals instead of “troubled kids”—compared to skateboarders for example, and were seen as advertising an appealing image for the city and the university (Fieldnotes 5/4/06). Local skateboarders often lamented this double standard. Second, because the most
economically successful riders purchased properties in town—some of them quite large and luxurious. Not only were riders initially seldom bothered by the police while riding, but the most recognizable were also treated sympathetically by authorities when, for example, they were pulled over for driving over the speed limit (Nyquist Interview 22/08/09). And unlike in other cities where the performances of extreme sport athletes like BMXers were often neglected, Greenville’s local newspapers began to cover the exploits of “its riders” regularly (Lilly Interview 07/05/05).

The town offered many other benefits as well. The riders who did not consistently make enough money to live solely off riding were able to reasonably easily find part-time jobs with understanding local businesses who gave them the flexibility to periodically leave town for contests and demonstrations. Moreover, the local university also provided them with “a fresh supply of girls” as one rider straightforwardly put it (Anonymous Interview 10/05/05). For the young, single, mostly heterosexual male riders, the opportunity to meet women played a non-negligible role in making their life more enjoyable. The local moral support peaked in 2005 when Mirra and Nyquist were given the keys to the city by the mayor.

In summary, the magnet place offered riders the possibility of developing a simple, focused and intensive lifestyle that allowed frequent, high level riding, while also providing for their financial, social and other needs. As Nyquist put it:

We were living almost like rock stars in Greenville. It was really amazing, just great, ‘cuz Greenville is such a small town. We would go to Boli’s (the local bar)… nightly, and Dave knew the manager and he would be hooking us up with pizza and beers for everybody. We walked into a place and we had this kind of instant respect and we were like “wow, this is kind of crazy!”…it was a weird reality. We had friends who knew what we did, who might have seen us on TV… we were treated like kings. It was really weird. We always ate out, rode until it was dark, go home, shower up, go out, go to Boli’s, hang out, meet girls, do whatever… no real responsibilities; it was really like surreal life. Looking back it was like super basic… now I have a kid, a wife, I have a mortgage, it seems like it’s much more complicated… all we had to do [back then] was worry about riding bikes (Nyquist Interview 22/08/09).
Interaction Between Different Types of Resources at Formation and Separation

**Formation**

This is the stage for which we can take best advantage of existing social movement literature, and in particular “resource mobilization theory” (RMT) (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Edwards and McCarthy 2004). The defining claim of RMT is that resources (rather than grievances) are the key variable in explaining mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983). Thus, much of the work done from this approach focuses on the resources that facilitate movement emergence. Much of the power of RMT is that its initial claim implied a number of (then) counterintuitive corollaries that could be empirically tested. Because resources are unevenly distributed among people and over time, RMT predicts that movements are more likely to emerge from the middle class (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Kim and Bearman 1997; McCarthy and Wolfson 1996), in more affluent societies (Wiest et al. 2002), and during better economic times (McLaughlin and Khawaja 2000; Soule et. al 1999). When mobilizations do emerge from the lower classes, RMT predicts that we are likely to find higher class “sponsors” materially supporting the movement.

There is already some evidence to support these hypotheses in the literature on collaborative circles, including in Farrell’s own writing. For example, considering the Frankfurt School as a collaborative circle, McLaughlin (2008) notes that Felix Weil’s windfall inheritance was a major factor in establishing the group. Consequently, he finds that the haven from Nazi Germany they found at Columbia University in the 1930s was essential to their continued existence. Likewise, Farrell’s (2001:27-56) case study on the Impressionist circle shows that they, too, would have been unable to develop without continuous material support from family members and their extended network. Farrell also writes that the wide range of styles accepted
in Charles Gleyre’s studio provided an important resource for Renoir’s and Bazille’s early development. Lastly, it is safe to further infer that the Impressionist’s style, which emerged from painting outdoor scenes, would not have developed in the same way had they been unable to enjoy the locational resource of Paris’ relatively temperate weather.

What Paris was for the Impressionists and Frankfurt (later Columbia) was for the critical theorists, Greenville was for the BMX circle. Greenville provided a fertile ground for an initially small group of talented individuals to come together at a time when their pursuit was not well known, widely accepted, or self-sustaining. During the formation stage (as well as the other early stages of development like rebellion and quest), the circle needed a geographical setting where the economic, climatic, and demographic characteristics allowed them to indulge in a lifestyle built almost exclusively around perfecting their skills. Similar to the collaborative circles studied by Farrell, the BMX riders needed a sort of incubation period where working in private and being tolerated by the local community (and local law enforcement) were the most valuable resources. In line with the RMT hypotheses, access to resources was an essential ingredient in circle formation. One further observation can be made with respect to the resources that enabled circle formation. For the BMX riders, it was not only the resources that they had access to, but also the resources that they lacked that were influential. As I have shown, “Jaycee” became a “Mecca” for the riders in part because, at the time, riders in Greenville did not have other adequate facilities to ride.³
Separation

Interpretation of the separation stage is an analytical challenge because, unlike in the formation stage, my findings do not seem to align neatly with previous results. According to Farrell’s theory, separation results in the dissolution of the group. Separation for the BMX riders, however, resulted in multiple overlapping circles, the ultimate outcome of which was the creation of a scene—a local instance of a wider subculture, which persists to this day. This separation was precipitated by a conflict between Mirra and Nyquist, the two main figures of the group. Thus, although some of the interpersonal dynamics that Farrell highlights help us explain the separation of the BMX circle, significant differences in outcome need to be accounted for.

The RMT literature is again useful in making sense of what happened. Earlier, movement emergence and circle formation were seen as roughly analogous stages, with findings and insights from research on the former providing intuitive suggestions for analysis of the latter. It is widely acknowledged, however, that RMT (and social movement literature more generally) pays significantly less attention to movement decline than it does to the early phases of mobilization (Edwards and Marullo 1995; Gillham and Edwards 2011; Staggenborg 2010). However, from the perspective of social movements, it is not at all clear that “decline” is the appropriate analogous phase. Although the original collaborative circle separated, the “movement” of BMX Freestyle certainly did not die with it. In large part due to the efforts of the circle itself, the resources available to BMX riders grew over the lifespan of the group by any measure (including prize money, visibility, prestige, corporate sponsorship opportunities, etc.). RMT predicts that in such cases where resources become more widely available, we should expect to find a proliferation of social movement organizations looking to take advantage of these resources. These organizations may
have essentially similar stated goals, but may compete among themselves for resources. RMT also points out that resource increase can allow a member to carry on alone, resulting in dissolution of the coalition (Jones et. al 2001). If we interpret BMX rider circles as roughly akin to social movement organizations in this analogy, then in fact this is precisely what occurred.

The separation of the group was caused by a number of factors, many of them similar to the ones identified by Farrell in explaining the break-up of other circles. The commercialization and partial professionalization of BMX offered larger material rewards for the riders, but also posed new demands similar to the ones faced by the Impressionists after their initial success (Farrell 2001:66). Moreover, the individuation—meaning: the emotional and economic independence, of Mirra and Nyquist, as well as their differential recognition in their increased encounters with both the public and the growing number of riders they inspired parallels the dynamic between Stanton and Anthony that led to the separation of the Ultras group (P. 255)—also known as the American “Suffragettes.” Finally, Mirra’s behavior was attributed by other riders to demands posed by new non-BMXer friends and the constitution of his own family, which was a common refrain in Farrell’s accounts of separation as well.

*From Play to Sport*

As explained in detail by Edwards and Corte (2010) the mass popularity and commercialization of BMX by large corporations dramatically influenced the local scene, as well as BMX at large. While contests were originally events organized *by riders for riders* with little to no **material resources** at stake, they partially became spectacles directed by people who knew nothing about sport, and were unaware of (or
As many riders pointed out, contests in the early days had been seen as opportunities to party and catch up with friends from other riding scenes. The larger competitions brought about by commercialization became a sort of “circus act” in which riders fulfilled the role of both athlete and entertainer (Mancuso Interview 12/05/06).

Commercialization involved a distortion of BMX, but also a chance for the most famous and successful riders to earn unprecedented sums of money, and motivation for others to chase the same. In Greenville, riders became increasingly busier, richer, and, to an extent, more serious to their approach to competitions and to training. This meant that riders had less time to dedicate to others, were less interdependent, and some undertook individualized cross-training programs to gain an advantage. Furthermore, commercialization also brought an influx of ambitious young riders to Greenville who had bought into a distorted version of the competitive ethos that the circle had originally pioneered. Their arrival was disrupting and threatening to the established riders because, among other things, these newcomers did not know or respect the established sponsorships tariffs, could then be paid less, and arguably were more keen on taking risks (S. Nyquist Interview 13/05/07).

Materially, the rewards of commercialization allowed the most successful riders to build smaller private riding facilities in their backyards. Initially, this did not threaten the group because it was understood that all riders had access to them. However, in 2002 Mirra built a 16,000 square foot warehouse in a commercial area a few miles outside of the city limits, and he along with a select group of friends withdrew from the scene. The barrier was not only geographical, but social as well, as

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4 This does not mean that a subcultural underground scene did not persist; it did and some Greenville riders continued competing there as well.
only certain riders were welcome there. The facility was designed specifically to practice new maneuvers in private, with the intention to unveil them at major competitions. Among the many excluded was Nyquist, who was Mirra’s best friend, but also principal competitor (and thus the most important person to hide innovations from). One rider commented:

Some people call Dave up every once in a while to ask him if he can bring their friends and Ryan who is a friend of Dave cannot even go there anytime he wants. This is because being the number one competitor of him (Mirra) whether on street or ramp, it is understandable that he does not want to train with him (Anonymous Interview 04/06/05).

Years later, I read this excerpt to Nyquist, adopting a type of interviewing “by comment” (Snow et al. 1982)—that is a kind of probe— which I label quotation. This technique entails reading selected excerpts from other interviews (while keeping the speaker anonymous). One of its uses is providing the interviewer with a pretext to approach a sensitive topic. He responded:

I guess it was really hard for me to understand why Dave was kind of shutting people out…For so long everything was open and free and I think a lot of people in BMX kind of saw what he was doing was weird. It makes sense on paper when you read it. You have the number one and number two guy, and you have those two guys who are really great friends. When the competition comes they both want to be the best … so like in the world of sport and competition it completely makes sense. In the world of BMX it did not make sense at all. (…) do I agree with the fact, with what he was doing? Yes and no. Like I said, it completely makes sense when you think of it…you take all emotions out of it, all whatever has been done in BMX, and you look at it…it makes sense. You have to do whatever it takes to get that edge. But the fact that we were all really tight, and like we’ve always ridden together, done so many things together, shared together, and all of a sudden… it threw me out for a loop… It was shaking and hurting. (Nyquist Interview 22/08/09)

In 2006, frustrated by not being able to ride Mirra’s warehouse and unchallenged by the public park, Nyquist bought land and built a warehouse, creating one of the best BMX parks in the world. Called “The Unit,” Nyquist’s park was open to anybody “in the know,” with the notable exception of Mirra (members of Mirra’s circle were welcome).
The split between Mirra and Nyquist led to the division of the group into two circles centered around Mirra and Nyquist, respectively. From this point, Greenville’s reputation continued to grow and more BMX pros moved into town, resulting in multiple circles within the scene. In line with Farrell’s theory, interpersonal dynamics played a major role in the separation of the original circle. However, the role of resources, and here especially the dramatic increase in (real and potential) material resources available to the riders as a result of commercialization, was again decisive in enabling those individuating dynamics to emerge and override long-established friendships. Moreover, the theory cannot account for the proliferation of circles that replaced the original except in an ad hoc way—a difficulty that insights from RMT also helps us resolve.
Conclusion

The purpose of this work has been to advance Farrell’s theory of collaborative circles through an ethnographic case study of professional BMX riders. While Farrell’s formulation provides an enlightening account of the social dynamics that enable creative collaboration, I have argued that its treatment of the contextual factors of that collaboration leaves important questions unanswered. Through these findings, I have demonstrated that the concept of resources, borrowed and adapted from the RMT literature, is one fruitful way of gaining analytic purchase on this ecological context. Thus the “magnet place,” which had worked in Farrell as an under-theorized generator of ad hoc causes, can be disentangled by reference to the mix of resources—human, material, moral, and locational—available to circle members.

In making this argument, I have attempted to move collaborative circles theory towards the “structural analysis” called for by Neil McLaughlin (2008:24).

This work also illustrates the ways that resources can enable and constrain the development of a collaborative circle during the critical stages of formation and separation. During the formation stage, Farrell highlights the importance of a “gatekeeper” who draws the members together and begins the work of establishing friendship relations. Equally important at this stage, however, is the need for privacy and tolerance while the work and vision of the group is being developed. For the Greenville riders, these were largely dependent on the availability of material and moral resources. During separation, I find that commercialization was the crucial external process that precipitated the split between Mirra and Nyquist. Moreover, I find that the dramatic increase in resources (both at stake and at disposal) allowed the strain in their relationship to express itself in a way that made continuation of the circle impossible. Like Parker and Hackett (2012) who studied the role of emotions in
scientific collaboration, I also find significant deviation from the typical pattern at the separation stage and, just as they do, I locate the cause of this deviation in “environmental, organizational, and economic contingencies” (P. 42, note 24).

Specifically, I find that separation of the circle led to the development of a still-thriving scene constituted by multiple circles—an outcome explained by the increase in available resources from commercialization and the persistence of appealing **locational resources** available in Greenville.

Finally, although it has not been the focus of my study, a few points have been made that may contribute to the **RMT** literature. First, I theorize what I have termed “**locational**” resources, defined as enabling resources that are available passively to all actors in a particular location. The presence of **locational resources** can positively augment the accessibility or usefulness of other species of resources (in the way, for example, that temperate weather augments the accessibility and usefulness of an outdoor skatepark). Second, I have noted that more is not always better when it comes to resources, as many **RMT** studies implicitly assume. Whether this is a general feature of movements, or whether this is particularly salient in the early phases of mobilization remain questions for future study.

Ultimately, it would be useful to learn how to identify circles in formation and foster their development. One first step is identifying the crucial resources that circles need at each stage of development. One wants to know how these groups form, how they flourish, if they necessarily need to separate, and how they might reproduce themselves so that as their original core dissolves, the project does not dissolve with them. In addition to the strategies suggested by Parker and Hackett (2012) for staving off separation (P. 39), I believe that a fuller understanding of the role of resources will be essential for answering these questions.
REFERENCES


McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. 1996. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge University Press.


Josh Harrington. Photo by Ugo Corte.
Marcus Tooker at the Unit. Photo by Ugo Corte.
Shea Nyquist at the Unit. Photo by Ugo Corte.